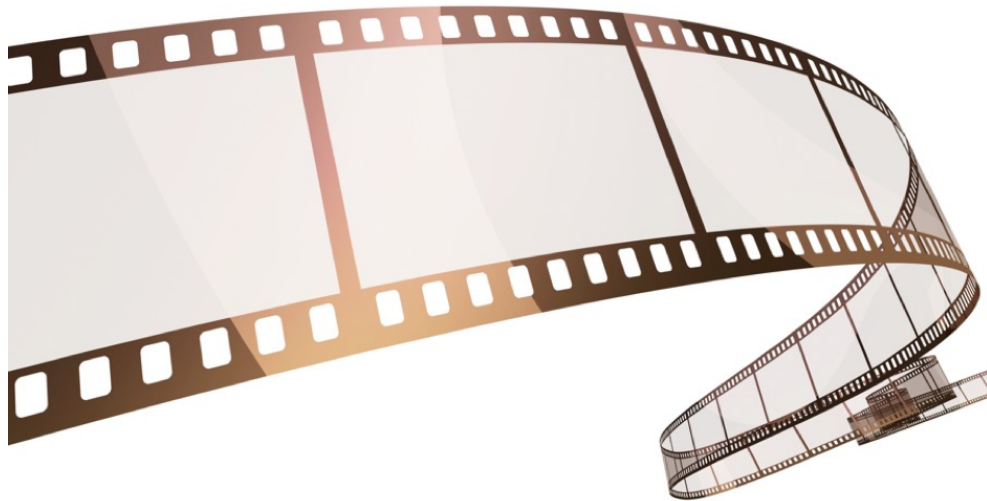


Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics

Special Issue – Philosophy of Film *Without Theory*



When the silent universe speaks. Testing
Camus' notion of the absurd in the alien
encounters of *Contact* and *Arrival*

Author

SHAI TUBALI

Affiliation

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Abstract: Albert Camus' concept of absurdity – as articulated in his works *The Stranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *The Rebel* – outlines a metaphysics of inherent struggle between the human mind that strives for unity and clarity and an inhumanly silent universe. When a human being realises that the frontiers of knowledge, meaning, separation and mortality are inescapable one can choose, Camus argues, to consciously and wholeheartedly embrace such limitations, while forever retaining the spirit of revolt that defies them.

In this essay I analyse two first-contact films – Robert Zemeckis’ *Contact* (1997) and Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival* (2016) – to test the legitimacy of Camus’ metaphysics in a universe where human estrangement seems to be disrupted by cosmic visitors. The films’ thought experiments support Camus’ universal vision, indirectly suggesting that even aliens are prone to recognising the absurdity of their or the universe’s condition. On the other hand, both films offer an approach of intimate communion with the cosmos, in light of which Camus’ description of the universe, as a stranger, might be too limited and limiting.

Both Robert Zemeckis’ *Contact* (1997) and Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival* (2016) vividly announce in their opening scenes their intention to explore a tension, as well as a potential meeting point, between the ordinary human condition and a vaster cosmic, or at least beyond-human, consciousness.

Contact’s opening shot begins with a view of earth from outer space, still close enough to detect its hubbub of contemporary radio and television chatter and sound. But the camera swiftly pulls back from the blue planet and retreats into deep space, gradually disengaging from the human drama. As the camera passes other planets in our solar system, the radio and television music and news reports rapidly go back in time to their earliest broadcast at the beginning of twentieth century. What, on earth, have been considered major historical turning points – human triumphs and atrocities alike – subside as the camera pulls back even further, out of the Milky Way and the cluster of galaxies of which it is part. This vision is reminiscent of the thought experiment – the Pale Blue Dot – suggested by astronomer Carl Sagan, who challenged us to radically question ‘our imagined self-importance’ in light of the humbling cosmological reality of our planet as a ‘lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark’.¹ Now, swallowed by numerous galaxies, nebulae and the immensity of space, silence prevails, making the entire human experience, with all its breakthroughs and limitations, seem like an odd, distant dream. The human cry is subdued by the astounding, but empty beauty of Camus’ silent and indifferent universe.

But just when the ‘silence, relentless movement, and the sheer size of the space’ start to ‘become oppressive’, the camera concludes its cosmic journey by emerging from the eye of a young girl.² This shot, which moves from the earthly stage to the vast cosmic arena, finally reveals itself as one that is contained within an individual mind, thus establishing a unity of inner and outer, human and universe. Our distinction between the subjective and the objective is momentarily shaken, but we soon return to the familiar absurd duality of a silent universe and human longing: We find the child leaning against her CB radio, imploring the universe to finally speak. Here the film

communicates its central theme, which coincides with Camus' metaphysics: 'Man's unconscious feelings in the face of his universe: an insistence upon familiarity'.³

Arrival also begins by juxtaposing human experience with a transhuman perspective. We hear a woman's voice-over, which is contrasted by the on-screen image of large windows framed by a dark, enclosing space: 'I used to think this was the beginning of your story. Memory is a strange thing. It doesn't work like I thought it did. We are so bound by time, by its order.' As this last sentence is spoken, we are presented with a series of vignettes, which exemplifies precisely that: a mother accompanying her child from birth to childhood to adolescence to premature death. That is the human chronology to which we are bound; the unstoppable pattern of the 'man condemned to death'.⁴ However, the images of the girl's life subtly prepare the viewer for a shift in perception: Her birth and death mirror one another; first, the newborn lies motionless in bed and the mother's expression could be interpreted as grieving, and later, in an identical position, the adolescent's still body lies in a hospital's bed; the new mother takes her crying baby from unknown hands, lovingly saying 'Come back to me', and then sobs next to her daughter's corpse, saying the very same words.

Through this sense of a beginning that is also an end, and a life that consumes itself before it begins, the voice-over makes the shift conscious: 'But now I'm not sure I believe in beginnings and endings. There are days that define your story beyond your life. Like the day they arrived.' These ironic opening lines further undermine the relation between the screen image and its verbal description, affording us what Nagel [1986] called 'the view from nowhere': a transcendent view, unbound by time and its order, that invades ordinary perception and separates consciousness from human experience.⁵ A moment later, linguist Dr. Louise Banks appears before her students, describing language as 'an expression of art' – that is, language can depart from any linear obligation and reshuffle life's sequence as it pleases.

The underlying thematic similarity of *Contact* and *Arrival* extends far beyond their opening scenes. In both films, the silent universe suddenly begins to speak in a language that humans struggle to comprehend. In *Contact*, a transmission from the star Vega reaches Dr. Eleanor Arroway, a SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) project scientist, as if in response to her childhood plea; what seems at first to be an audio signal reveals a hidden video and 63,000 pages of indecipherable data. In *Arrival*, twelve 1,500-foot elongated oval-shaped spacecrafts appear out of the blue at different, inexplicably connected locations on earth. The faceless aliens that inhabit them, humanly called 'Heptapods' because of their seven limbs, seem to express themselves emotionally through incomprehensible groans and vibrations, but they slowly disclose their second, more intellectual language, a stunningly otherworldly visual language, which they are eager to teach humans.⁶ Much of the plot of each of these films is dedicated to the earthlings' efforts to comprehend and

respond to the aliens' transmissions, their failures to do so and the way their collision with the alien language reflects the limits of human experience. In both films, the earnest attempts of the heroines to decipher and answer the messages lead them to temporarily merge their minds with the alien minds, as a direct outcome of which they have transcendent, cosmic experiences, during which they perceive as the aliens perceive. Finally, the two plots deal with the lasting impact of the cosmic event on Arroway's and Banks' experiences of their limited human existence.

Since this thematic commonalities of the two films strike me as a promising foundation for a unified exploration of absurdity, I shall set their analyses side by side, starting with the shared characteristics of the two heroines.⁷

THE STRUGGLE FOR UNITY

After their intentionally disorienting opening scenes, the two films introduce us to the main characters. *Contact* presents astronomer Dr. Eleanor 'Ellie' Arroway, and *Arrival* linguist Dr. Louise Banks. Both are female scientists who are soon destined to take on the task of deciphering an incomprehensible cosmic language. But what makes them more capable than others of decoding transmissions of a higher, transcendent order?

Interestingly, Ellie and Louise alike are portrayed as strangers in their own world, intensely detached, impersonal and excessively dedicated to their work. In *Contact*, a short scene from Ellie's childhood provides important clues regarding the origins of her later detachment. Ellie, the same child in whose consciousness the entire cosmic journey unfolded, leans against her CB radio, pleading for contact. Having had some success in reaching Pensacola, Florida, she asks her father whether they could similarly talk to the moon and to Jupiter; soon after, she poignantly wonders: 'Could we talk to Mom?' His response compels Ellie to come up against Camus' uncrossable limit of death: 'I don't think even the biggest radio could reach that far'. One could perhaps contact Jupiter, but one could never look beyond death's barriers. This scene makes it clear that her appetite for science is indistinguishably intermixed with a private hope, a combination that results in a profound 'nostalgia for unity'.⁸ Since Ellie wants to know if there are 'people on other planets' shortly after hearing that she could never reach her Mom, it is reasonable to conclude that much of her zeal for communicating with the impossible – after all, even alien lifeforms are more reachable than the dead – is a transformation of her original, more emotional longing for unity.⁹ This is indicated by the way in which the shot of the little girl sitting by her radio at night time, deciding that she would need a bigger antenna, dissolves into a shot of the adult Ellie looking at a huge radio telescope. This magical wish-fulfillment establishes the film's story as the 'externalisation of the protagonist's subjectivity'.¹⁰

One sentence that is repeated three times in *Contact* – 'If it is just us, it seems like an awful waste of space' – establishes the film's main theme,

that of private and cosmic loneliness. The nothingness into which her mother has vanished (and later, her father too, ironically while Ellie is occupied observing through her telescope) is the same impenetrable sterile infinity that surrounds humanity's absurdly isolated culture. Space is equated with death in which she hopes to discover life, and raising one's head toward the heavens is akin to trying to find the afterworld. When we encounter Ellie as an adult, she is a disillusioned orphan, blind to the human world around her, avoiding opportunities for earthly intimacy while devoting her entire emotional longing to a possible union with the heavens. Camus could easily blame her, and possibly Sagan as well, for wishing to commit 'philosophical suicide' – the hope of being rescued from the limits of human experience by some external force while overlooking the only life we have. Indeed, the film itself critically reflects her unwillingness to realise earthly contacts.

Louise Banks, *Arrival's* heroine, appears to be a highly disconnected and indifferent person. This is partly because of the film's manipulation of the sequence of events; its explicit intention to foster in the viewer the misconception that Louise's daughter lived and died before its story commences. Hence, the viewer wrongly interprets Louise's odd behaviour as a grieving process that has not come to a close and naturally assumes that her remoteness originates from the same sense of unbearable loss, as in *Contact*. Its visual style is characterised by enclosing, extreme darkness, which creates an unnerving, intimate and somber mood, Louise paces through the university's halls and corridors, bizarrely incurious about the fact that nearly all students have gathered around the windows and only a handful have chosen to attend her lecture.¹¹ She tries to ignore the constant ringing of her students' mobile phones, until finally forced by one to turn the TV to a news channel, witnessing for the first time the historical report of the landing of the twelve alien objects. Even then, in the midst of chaos and hysteria, she remains a distant observer, unable to take part in her mother's anxiety, saying blankly of her own emotional state that she is 'about the same'; a day later, she insists on returning, as usual, to an utterly empty university and lecture hall. As a linguist who cannot speak and a profoundly dissociated woman, she herself seems like an alien, her home like a spaceship, floating in isolation from events and people.

This alienness, however, somehow endows both Ellie and Louise with a unique capacity to keep their ears open to nonhuman transmissions. They may not be able to speak 'human' that well, but they exhibit impressive skilfulness when it comes to speaking 'cosmic' and bridging the two languages. They approach the aliens in an unmediated, personal way, and they are chosen by the aliens for exactly that reason. Although both are scientists, they allow the feminine and the intimate to guide them. Indeed, the hidden message of both films is that only the emotional, intuitive connection can overcome what Camus considered the limit of separation.

In *Contact*, Ellie is clearly not a conventional scientist, though she certainly makes a concerted effort to seem like one. Sagan's widow, Ann Druyan, who wrote the film's story outline with him, explained in an interview that 'we wanted to do a story about a woman like Carl', which to them implied 'a character driven in an almost Old Testament way by the need to know the truth'.¹² This tireless drive of a Biblical prophet is, in Ellie, an amalgam of emotional pain and its mutation into science, a vehemently denied spiritual longing for unity, and a genuine scientific passion. All three components cause her listening to the cosmos to be urgent and acute, wishing less for a scientific discovery and more for actual contact that would be strong enough to dissipate cosmic loneliness. In one shot, just before the dramatic moment when the alien signal is received, we see several huge radio antennas lined up in a way that is reminiscent of the known monolithic human figures on Easter Island: those giant-headed statues that raise their faces with anticipation toward the sky. As the camera tilts down, Ellie is revealed, in the very same position. She has become an antenna herself, her whole being directed to receive (see figure 1).



Figure 1: *Contact*. Ellie becomes aligned with the radio antennas.

Since Ellie's character is designed to struggle to cover up the origins of her attraction to the alien encounter, she is surrounded by two who mirror those aspects of herself until she is able to consciously embrace them. The first is Kent, her blind colleague, whose impairment makes it possible for him to engage more intimately with the universal transmissions, as if from within. The second is Palmer Joss, a young theologian, author, and a presidential spiritual counselor. Palmer represents her unconscious emotional and spiritual

quest. He is motivated by a life-changing spiritual experience, which echoes Ellie's own scientific endeavour: While he was 'looking at the sky', all of a sudden he became filled with the feeling that he was not alone. Palmer responds to her suggestion that he may have had this experience because some part of him needed to have it by insisting on inner knowing as an unverifiable transcendent recognition, stating that 'My intellect couldn't even touch this'.¹³ Palmer keeps pointing out that the real issue is the deep-seated and much overlooked hunger of the human heart; the fact that despite scientific advances, 'we feel emptier and more cut off from each other', devoid of any sense of direction. His symbol of what really matters is a toy compass, which he hands Ellie, hinting that emotional connection and the spiritual longing for union are the keys to navigating an incomprehensible universe, as well as the depths of one's own incomprehensible self.¹⁴

Despite her character's need for external representations of her irrational and intuitive drives, Ellie's reaction to the signals from Vega is explicitly distinguished from the reactions of her fellow scientists, government officials, and public. She seems to trust the aliens' intention almost religiously, strongly resisting the masculine, militaristic and oppressive elements that invade her intimate space of listening. She remains steadfast, even when the signal's first layer is decoded – revealing a video of Hitler initiating the Olympics in 1936, which further incites the war-like spirit, suspicion, paranoia and fragmentation around her. When the message is finally decrypted as the schematics for a complex machine that is determined to be a sort of a transport for a single traveler, she is willing to blindly follow the aliens' manual, even though the odd spacecraft lacks a chair, a restraining harness, survival gear and recording equipment. Significantly, in Sagan's novel the transport is meant for five occupants – the film's choice to dramatically turn it into a one-seat spacecraft emphasises the cosmic journey as a journey into one's own consciousness, in which the universe is as subjective as it is objective. We are left to wonder whether it is Ellie's overwhelming desire for unity that spurs the silent cosmos to finally speak.

In *Arrival*, the humanly indifferent heroine, Louise, reveals profound emotional capacities for trust, intimacy and passion for direct communication as soon as she is introduced to the opportunity of contact with the aliens. As a linguist, she considers language to be the 'glue that holds people together', the power that can either encourage separation or lead to unity. Louise is contrasted with Ian, a theoretical physicist who believes in the superiority of science as a universal language, unlike *Contact*'s Palmer. He is muscularly eager to elicit scientific knowledge from the aliens, but she stops him and asks, 'How about we just talk to them before we start throwing math problems at them?' Unlike all the other emissaries who have been selected to dialogue with the aliens, for Louise the glass wall that stands between them quickly turns from an untraversable limit of separation into a transparent meeting point, where the two can become one in mind. In Ted Chiang's *The Story*

of *Your Life*, the novella that inspired *Arrival*, this movement toward union is well captured: ‘The looking glass appeared to grow transparent; it was as if someone was slowly raising the illumination behind tinted glass.¹⁵ The illusion of depth was uncanny; I felt I could walk right into it.’ Louise takes brave steps toward this limit – which is like the imagined distance between the universe and oneself – and insists on personalising the encounter, making it individual in a humanly familiar way. To everyone’s shock, she removes her protective gear, saying ‘They need to see me’, presses her hand against the glass wall, and names the two aliens. Like Ellie, she is carried away by the longing to lift the veil between herself and the universe’s mysteries, willing to take the deadly risk of removing all defences. To begin to speak its language, whose grammar is ‘perfectly ambiguous’,¹⁶ we ought to ‘lend ourselves to its life’, understand it through our body, and let it inhabit our being to the point that we ‘cannot tell what comes from me and what from it’ (see figure 2).¹⁷

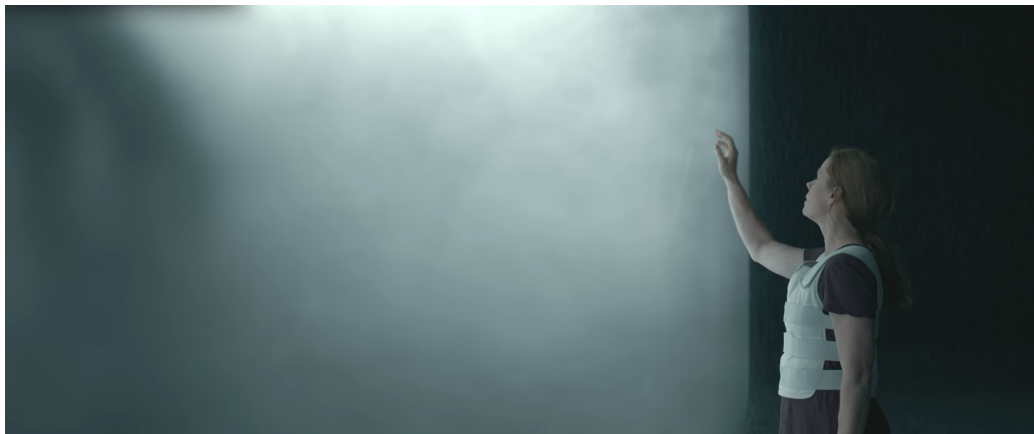


Figure 2: *Arrival*. Louise and the transparent glass wall.

While Louise’s exceptional longing is rewarded by the universe’s agents – they switch from their vocal language to their visual language and even press one of their appendages against the glass to craft with her a circular logogram in a unified flow – her growing intimacy with them is contrasted with intense governmental, militaristic and public paranoia. As in *Contact*, this contrast enables us to identify the heroine as an ideal candidate for the cosmic encounter. The same language that draws Louise toward union is interpreted by everyone else in the spirit of separation. As Bowker shows, Camus’ limit of separation may indicate not a resisting universe, but rather an ambivalence within human consciousness regarding unity and individuality.¹⁸ Terms used by the aliens’ visual language, such as ‘Use weapon’ (which really means ‘Tools’) or ‘The many become one’ (which is intended to encourage planetary oneness), only elicit people’s dread of extermination. Since the aliens in both

Contact and *Arrival* are but a looking glass through which humanity's own self-destructive forces are reflected, we can say that the language with which we approach the universe – be it separative or unitive – is exactly what is thrown back at us.

THE GODS OF THE UNIVERSE

In both films, the aliens serve a dual role. Their first role is as complex life-forms who are similar to humans in that they too possess a self-reflective mind – though theirs is clearly far superior to humans' in its cognitive functions and scientific insight. In Camusean metaphysics, the very experience of having a mind that stands out from creation is absurdity itself, since it necessitates a split between life and the consciousness of life, which makes the longing for unity innate as well as inevitable. This fundamental condition subjects the aliens to the laws of the absurd universe, and implies that, in opposition to Camus' definition of absurdity as an exclusively human predicament, enduring the absurd is the mark of consciousness in whatever form it may take. Symptoms of this paradoxical existence within a universe that will not betray its meaning can be easily identified in *Contact*'s and *Arrival*'s extraterrestrials, even though the limits their minds must come up against are not as tight or as suffocating.

In *Contact*, when Ellie is pushed to convey to Palmer her personal motivation for embarking on such a life-endangering journey to Vega, she says: 'For as long as I can remember, I've been searching for . . . some reason why we're here. What are we doing here? Who are we?' This statement discloses an expectation that the aliens would assume the role of the mystical God and would be able to relieve her and humanity as a whole of its limits of knowing and meaning. Yet, after she is taken to an awe-inspiring cosmic voyage within the alien spacecraft and both her and the viewer's expectations reach a peak, the encounter itself, despite being emotionally satisfying, is rather disappointing, since the alien, embodied as her deceased father, has absolutely no meaningful answer and is almost as confused as she is. In response to Ellie's question, 'Why did you contact us?' he answers, 'You contacted us. We were just listening' – which means that both sides were merely reflecting each other's longing for unity. His ultimate conclusion about the meaning of life is also frustrating: 'In all our searching, the only thing we've found that makes the emptiness bearable is each other'.¹⁹ He has no idea how the transport system came into being in the first place, so it seems that its only role is to initiate bonds and to supply all isolated cultures with a reassuring sense of togetherness within a terrifyingly senseless universe. It is only through this emotional connectedness that self-reflective minds can overcome the cosmic emptiness. Hence, the absurd cannot be overcome through the aliens' greater cognitive functions or phenomenal scientific advancement, since these cannot

break the limit of meaning that stubbornly safeguards the 'why' of all existence. As Bryan Stone puts it, 'Twenty-six light years and all we get is a cure for interplanetary angst!'²⁰

Arrival's aliens are also entrapped in a peculiar absurd condition: Endowed with a simultaneous, rather than sequential, mode of awareness, which allows them to transcend linear order and to experience 'all events at once', they are consciously bound to a fate that they are unable to change.²¹ For instance, they participate enthusiastically in a conversation though they are already familiar with its eventual outcome, because they must actualise the conversation 'for their knowledge to be true'.²² Thus, for them any humanly spontaneous discourse is a mere 'ritual recitation'.²³ Even though Chiang's novella carefully explicates their state of consciousness as a paradoxical one, which far surpasses rigid human concepts of either free will or determinism,²⁴ one cannot deny its absurdist aspect which further tightens Camus' limit of repetition: Merely enacting one's foreseen chronology seems to intensify the sense that we 'continue making the gestures commanded by existence'²⁵ and the awkward feeling that, in a universe in which 'nothing is possible but everything is given',²⁶ 'there is no future'.²⁷ In light of the aliens' obligation to powerlessly yet wholeheartedly engage in the drama of their life, Nagel's comment that the absurd condition only comes into play when a transcendent consciousness is involved – causing us to lead a 'meagre yet frantic life' that cannot rise above its own programming – becomes even more acutely relevant.²⁸

Yet, as well as actively participating in the absurd condition, both alien life-forms play a second role as agents of the universe itself, beings that are organically connected to the cosmic web and fabric and, as such, who speak on its behalf. That is to say, when they speak, it is the universe itself breaking its eternal silence. Indeed, the two films pack the close encounters with religious symbolism and sentiment, presenting the extraterrestrials as the ultimate other – so much so that one might wonder whether we, as humanity, or at least as humans who create cinematic visions, have killed God only to replace him with these gods of the universe. Not only does the mere proximity of such beings seem to overwhelm humans with an almost God-fearing sense of awe, but they also offer humans a potential unification with their minds that results in a redemptive-like transformation. In both films, the aliens grant humanity a cosmic gift: a new capacity that connects worlds and dimensions and enables humans to better grasp the universe's hidden language, thus making them feel more at one with themselves, their fellow human beings and the universe as a whole.

In *Contact*, the encrypted manual of the alien transport is given without any added explanation of its purpose, expecting humanity to expend half a trillion dollars while blindly trusting the extraterrestrials' good intentions. This is reminiscent of ancient gods who test their believers' readiness to take leaps of faith without understanding their arbitrary actions. The fact that

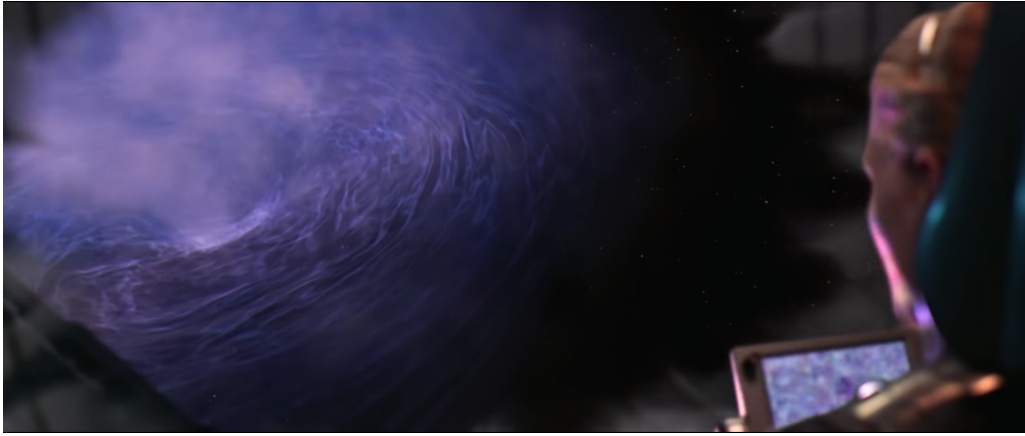


Figure 3: *Contact*. Ellie takes a leap of faith.

they do not include in their schematics any safety measures and devise the entire spacecraft for a single occupant echoes the religious mythology of the true believer whose innocence of heart and childlike spirit would make them worthy of entering God's kingdom. Whereas, in the eyes of humanity, the voyage to Vega is a collective enterprise, the journey itself seems orchestrated by the aliens as a process of initiation that purges the believer of doubt, prepares her to humbly behold the face of God and transports her to an altogether different dimension and state of consciousness. Their disinterest in documenting the event and the fact that Ellie visibly has not traveled anywhere are a declaration that this is a purely subjective, unshareable exploration of the domain of the spirit. We are once again reminded of the film's opening shot: The journey into the depths of the cosmos is a journey into the depths of one's consciousness.

When Ellie paces through the passage that leads to the vehicle, it seems like a bridge between the world of humankind and a cosmic kingdom where humans have no dominion. From that moment on, rich mystical imagery permeates every scene: As soon as the spacecraft begins to operate, its material transmutes into a translucent, intangible substance which is pierced by white light, and as the discs that revolve around the transport accelerate, the entire system is flooded with light. Though deeply shaken, Ellie withstands the believer's test of fear and is plunged into a series of wormholes, which are depicted as tunnels ending in light (see figure 3). She then witnesses a 'celestial event', a vision whose immense poetic beauty overpowers her capacity to analyse and explain and rekindles her lost childhood innocence and original longing for unity (see figure 4).

Now that she has been purified and her heart can rest having gained direct knowledge, the camera takes the opposite direction, pulling into her eye, and we find Ellie floating in a foetal position. In a way that recalls the climatic ending of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, she has been reborn as a cosmic child.



Figure 4: *Contact*. A mystical cosmic vision.

When Ellie lands in a projected Pensacola, Florida – which represents her childhood wish-fulfilment when making an initial contact with the ‘cosmos’ – she is met by the aliens’ collective consciousness which has taken the form of her deceased father. This is strikingly similar to the religious images of ascension to heaven and the re-encounter with one’s physically lost loved ones. Sagan’s novel makes it more explicit: ‘It was as if her father had these many years ago died and gone to Heaven, and finally . . . she had managed to rejoin him’.²⁹ The aliens are no doubt like angels and deities, as they are able to look inside one’s unconscious and derive from it a compelling, healing vision.³⁰ Intellectually, they play an insignificant role, but their emotional and spiritual role is far-reaching. While compassionately reflecting Ellie’s and mankind’s inborn nature as a blend of inner contradictory forces at the core of which lies Camus’ profound pain of alienness and longing, it is obvious that the aliens have achieved a transcendent state, free of essential conflict. Ellie’s father is transformed into the heavenly father who patiently accompanies his child’s growth: In the novel, when he sends her back home, she wonders, ‘That’s it? No commandments?’ and he answers, ‘You’re grown up now, you’re on your own’.³¹

In *Arrival*, twelve alien spaceships land on earth, in what seems like a second coming preceded by the twelve messengers. The twelve function as a highly developed unified consciousness, and their constantly hovering, oval-shaped spacecrafts seem surprisingly organic, unlike human machinery, which stands out starkly from the natural world. Villeneuve packs the spacecraft with humbling religious symbolism. The first time Louise and the other delegates enter, it looks and sounds as if they have entered a temple.

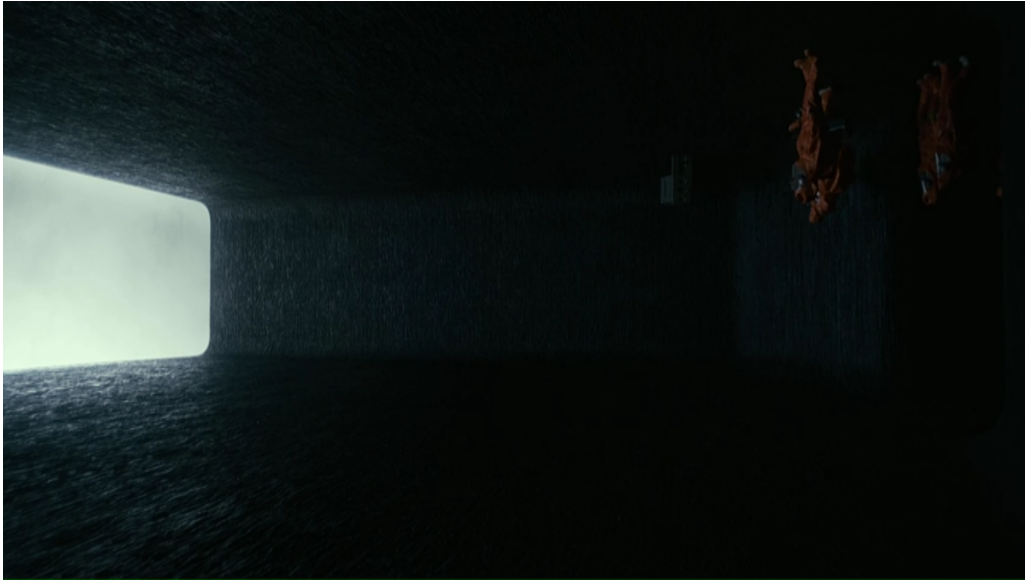


Figure 5: *Arrival*. A cosmic pilgrimage.

The group, whose members seem like a procession of monks, must leave the human world behind and completely lose control in order to be sufficiently elevated to meet the cosmic being (see figure 5). The imagery recalls a mystical experience: They have only a borrowed time, a window that opens in the midst of ordinary perception, and they must travel through a tunnel at the end of which awaits a luminous portal to the other world (see figure 6).



Figure 6: *Arrival*. Light at the end of the tunnel.

Within the vessel's topsy-turvy interior, earth's gravity is 'strangely re-configured' so the humans must take a 'literal leap of faith up into an open vertical shaft'.³² This pilgrimage prepares for a perception that transcends

time and space, in which the heavens turn into earth, the future becomes the past and the present has already happened. On the other side, the aliens, in a revelation-like gesture, appear from within a smokescreen. As soon as the human visitors can no longer endure the unusual conditions, like ‘insects on a piece of paper’, they are eased ‘out of the house’.

The aliens’ visual language is organically emitted from within their bodies and evaporates soon after, leaving no trace in time. Constantly immersing her mind and heart in it, Louise’s consciousness unifies with theirs, infiltrated by their transcendent perception to the depths of her subconscious mind, which results in dreams and visions. As in *Contact*, the gods reward the fervent and innocent believer. Eventually, their language impregnates her, filling her body with both the new life of her baby girl and a book titled ‘The Universal Language’.³³ When a crisis of fear and suspicion overwhelms the nations of the earth, she feels even more uncontrollably drawn toward a direct, unprotected union. She is granted permission to enter the inner sanctum, beyond the glass wall, where nothing separates her from the cosmic being (see figure 7). Appropriately, the physical closeness only enhances the encounter’s spiritual dimension and the scene resembles an ascension to heaven: a bright white light, a cloud-like groundless ground and aliens who hover above its surface. The film’s visual style of framing people and objects in darkness is noticeably replaced with a wide, limitless space. As a result of the merging, the impregnation of Louise’s mind deepens and she becomes a vehicle of planetary change, bringing together people and nations through the power of this all-seeing perception. She turns into a host of two different worlds, the human linear mind and the cosmic nonlinear consciousness. When the cosmic language reigns, past and future are experienced all at once and her consciousness ‘becomes a half century-long ember burning outside time’.³⁴ As Fleming and Brown put it, Louise has contacted the “dark” forces of the universe that ‘both give and take away what humans consider to be life’, forces that allow her a ‘black enlightenment’ – a capacity to see into that which lies beyond human vision.³⁵ Equipped with this capacity, she moves beyond the ‘paralysing boundaries of knowledge of reality’ – in other words, beyond Camus’ limits of thought.³⁶

In both *Contact* and *Arrival*, the breaking of human limits and the visions of the unlimited send the heroines back to earth with a far greater capacity to embrace the human condition. Indeed, the shift to a cosmic perception mends their broken humanity and establishes a sense of connectedness to a universal order as well as to the value of life, human solidarity and personal love. Ironically, associating with the ultimate stranger has made them significantly less emotionally estranged and more grounded in life as humans. In *Contact*, Ellie’s trust in her cosmic experience is severely tested: Those watching saw the transport drop straight through the machine into the water and the recording seems to document only static, so she is compelled to



Figure 7: *Arrival*. Louise enters the inner sanctum

defend her revelation in the face of an entire skeptical world just like any religious person would need to do – on the basis of inner conviction.³⁷ Yet, in spite of the scientist in her, she publicly insists that this vision of the universe has changed her forever, assuring her that humans are paradoxically precious, as much as they are insignificant, and that they belong to something greater than themselves. The fundamental Camusean condition of man as ‘an alien, a stranger’, in a ‘universe divested of illusions and lights’, is no more, since she is imbued with a newfound uninterrupted connectedness to the cosmos as well as to her fellow humans.³⁸ Although the universe has provided her with no answer, it has actively engaged in responding to her heart’s deeper desire. Through this sense of wonder at the miracle of existence and her restored passion for unity, she can find a common ground with Palmer, spiritually as well as emotionally. (More philosophically, they now seem to agree on the shared origin of the scientific and mystical searches. In the novel, Sagan directly quotes Einstein’s statement that the ‘cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research’.³⁹ See also Krämer, who argues that Palmer’s description of his revelation of God is eventually unified with Ellie’s cosmic experience, which demonstrates the ‘compatibility of emotional, religious, and scientific worldviews’.⁴⁰) Her acute detachment has been replaced by a readiness to guide groups of children at her SETI site, kindling in them their own passion for truth-seeking, which signifies that the child in her has been reawakened. The film ends with a shot of Ellie sitting on a precipice, this time not aligned with the radio antennas, as in her previous anxious search, but instead with her back turned to them, gazing at the desert-view in a state of deep cosmic unity. She gathers some sand in the palm of her hand, just like the alien did in the imagined Pensacola, as if to show that the far edges of the universe and human existence are now one and the same; as above, so below. In its final, deeply subjective tone, the film

prefers its psychological and spiritual dimensions to the external implications of the discovery of alien life-forms.

Similarly, *Arrival* demonstrates how a transcendent, cosmic perspective can empower an individual to wholeheartedly say ‘yes’ to the absurd human condition. The more Louise’s mind becomes steeped in the alien perception of time as a unity of past, present and future, the more she is flooded by images and feelings that her linear human mind can only interpret as memories. But later she is informed by the alien that she is living out precognitive moments of her own future, witnessing the entirety of her future daughter’s life, from birth to premature death due to a rare type of cancer. In this paradoxical perception, which goes beyond free choice and determinism, choosing to avoid this fate is impossible, since the choices she will make along the way are already embedded in her vision. Like Sisyphus, she will have to travel this path, consciously pushing her life’s rock upward only to watch it rushing down.⁴¹ For ordinary humans, the limit of knowing includes their incapability of seeing the path ahead, but when that limit is stretched, one is left to wonder which condition is more absurd: following the path blindfolded or, like Oedipus, being a mere witness of a god-given future.⁴² Knowing the future, which is romantically considered a superpower, becomes terribly ironic when one’s future is to accompany one’s only daughter toward an unstoppable death. This is what Louise will later tell her daughter, Hannah: ‘You are unstoppable’ – what serves to empower her daughter truly conceals her mother’s awakened absurd awareness of the wonder and pain involved in life’s gushing stream of birth and death.

The freedom of choice that Louise eventually finds is very similar to Camus’ consequence of freedom: realising that freedom is not at all about one’s capacity to direct one’s life but rather, about the internal choice of whether or not to accept ‘such a universe and draw from it his strength’.⁴³ Ironically, her undeniable vision of the future unchains her from the shackles of anticipation and releases her from the very illusion of having a future, thus unifying her tragic consciousness and her fate. She gives her absurd consent to Ian’s proposal to make a baby, while at the same time, just like the Camusean rebel, she accepts sometimes not accepting.⁴⁴ She successfully passes Nietzsche’s test of eternal recurrence, declaring: ‘Despite knowing the journey and where it leads, I embrace it and I welcome every moment of it.’ And when she asks Ian, ‘If you could see your whole life from start to finish, would you change things?’ her now transcendent condition is starkly compared to the human predicament, making it clear that in both cases the noble answer should be the same. (In embracing life’s circle of birth and death, Fleming and Brown write, ‘*Arrival* suggests humility before eternity’ and humanness before a desired godlike immortality.⁴⁵ This is compatible with Camus’ statement that we ought to ‘learn to live and die’, since to be a man, one must refuse to be a god) Her advantage, however, is clear: The vast cosmic perspective has opened in her more space within which the human condition can be better contained and embraced as an experience worth living.⁴⁶

IN CONCLUSION

Over the last two decades, many philosophers have been increasingly inclined to consider film – and, more specifically, science-fiction film – as a source of philosophical inquiry.⁴⁷ However, opinions on the exact philosophical nature of film differ starkly. Some scholars consider film an external embodiment of philosophical thought, and, as such, an ‘effective tool for introducing a philosophical topic’.⁴⁸ Others suggest that films may provoke philosophical thinking and both echo and develop philosophical ideas.⁴⁹ A more provocative approach, most prominently expressed by Stephen Mulhall, rejects both previous approaches on the basis that their use of film only serves to reconfirm theories to which they are already committed.⁵⁰ Maintaining that films are active participants in the making of philosophy, Mulhall argues for their capacity to expand philosophy beyond the reach of formal arguments. Interestingly, this is congruent with Camus’ consideration of the philosophical novel as a ‘philosophy put into images’.⁵¹

In this article, I have approached the two films as makers of philosophy. Consequently, my reading has not only demonstrated that science fiction films contain elements of absurdity but also that they offer different ways of understanding absurdity and responding to it. If analysing science fiction films can make us think of the absurd in ways that are not possible otherwise, we may conclude that these films are capable of challenging existing philosophies.

Essentially, Camus’ absurdity as a description of the human condition has been retained in both *Contact* and *Arrival*. The agonising clash with the limits of separation, knowing, meaning, death and repetition, serves as a crucial catalysing force in both narratives. Moreover, even though the conditions of the universe have been altered – for instance, knowing that we are not alone within the cosmic emptiness, or being able to rise above the sightless human journey to perceive the entire time continuum – the Camusean metaphysics seems to be quite resilient. This reaffirms the assumption that the absurd is a state that we would take with us to any universe, regardless of the conditions of that universe. Despite the expansion of the limits of the knowable, the inherent tension between the human longing for clarity and the ‘unreasonable silence of the world’⁵² has not been affected, since, as Foley points out, the absurd problem is not that the world remains unintelligible, but that it ‘remains unintelligible in ways meaningful to humankind’.⁵³ Neither the humans nor the aliens disrupt the universe’s silence on the subject of its meaning, and both sides are compelled to define for themselves an answer to Camus’ question of whether life is worth the trouble at all.⁵⁴ This seems to be an inescapable component of any self-reflective mind in the universe, deriving from the collision between a transcendent consciousness and its own limitations. It does, however, propel humans and extraterrestrials alike toward a sort of an intergalactic solidarity. After all, in a universe where the only thing that ‘makes the emptiness bearable is each other’, it makes sense

to recognise that, under the blistering cosmic sun of absurdity, the ‘fates of aliens and humans are entangled’.⁵⁵

That said, the two films seem indirectly critical of Camus’ metaphysical view that the universe is inhuman, hostile and strange – the cosmic setting that unavoidably entraps humans within the limit of separation.⁵⁶ In their depiction of their heroines’ direct and unprotected way of approaching the cosmic transmissions, as well as their portrayal of the aliens as emissaries of the universe itself, they suggest that Camus’ pathos is just a matter of a limited perspective. The universe may not speak ‘human’, but it is possible that part of the human can speak ‘cosmic’. When a willing human opens up to a communion with the cosmos – through intimate listening, intuition, emotional longing, a sense of wonder, and Einstein’s cosmic ‘religious feeling’ – one may find that, in its way, the universe is more responsive than Camus’ hopelessness would suggest. Even though the limit of meaning remains forever impenetrable, it is likely that the human heart’s thirst is not to be quenched by answers, but rather by a sense of genuine connectedness to the web and fabric of the cosmos, as well as transcendent states of union with a cosmic perspective, just as Sagan proposed in his Pale Blue Dot thought experiment. Such incidents may heal the human wound of separation, and they do not fall into Camus’ category of ‘philosophical suicide’, since they are a resolution from within the depths of this universe; hence, they still count as the only life we have. In this light, confining oneself in the cosmic prison cell, in accord with the philosophical attitude adopted in *The Stranger* and *The Myth*, can be perceived as akin to strangling oneself while complaining that one is unable to breathe. One does not need to yearn for a dehumanisation – regressing to some original condition of organic unity devoid of consciousness⁵⁷ – or demand a complete comprehension of the universe’s hidden metaphysics.⁵⁸ On the contrary, human consciousness ought to keep its eyes wide open and, in Einstein’s words, ‘stand rapt in awe’.⁵⁹

Such direct encounters, both *Contact* and *Arrival* clearly demonstrate, do not elucidate, but transform. After stretching one’s mind beyond its familiar human limits toward cosmic realities, one is sent back, as it were, far better equipped to wholeheartedly embrace the absurd condition. After the heroines are shifted to Nagel’s ‘view from nowhere’ and their witnessing consciousnesses momentarily separate from the lives they are witnessing, their readiness to participate in the drama of their lives – despite the suffering and struggle involved – is now a profoundly conscious choice. Indeed, having had their transhuman part awakened and having perceived the invisible web of interconnectedness and cosmic order, everything seems to be embraceable and in place, absurd walls included.

prst@leeds.ac.uk

NOTES

¹Sagan 1997 had also authored the novel *Contact*, which he toiled to bring to the screen during the final seventeen years of his life; sadly, he died while the movie was being filmed (Svetkey 1997).

²Krämer 2013.

³Camus 2005, 15.

⁴Camus 2005, 53.

⁵Nagel 1986.

⁶The complex calligraphy, which is organically produced by an ink emitted from the Heptapods' bodies, consists of individual, circular logograms, thus expressing a perception that has no beginning and no end

⁷The term 'heroines' emphasises that the characters become heroic in virtue of their audacious journey of transcendence

⁸Camus 2005, 48.

⁹Ebert 1997.

¹⁰Krämer 2013, 132

¹¹Carruthers 2018, 324.

¹²Svetkey 1997.

¹³In this, he is like a Chestov or a Kierkegaard, both criticised by Camus for violating the limit of knowing through their 'sacrifice of the intellect' (Camus 2005, 36).

¹⁴Palmer's stance corresponds well with Camus' human solidarity as a proper response to the absurd: The answer to cosmic loneliness is one another

¹⁵Chiang 2016, 5.

¹⁶Chiang 2016, 30.

¹⁷Richard 2018, 42, 44.

¹⁸Bowker 2008, 141.

¹⁹This is compatible not only with Camus' limit of meaning and his positive response of human solidarity, but also with Palmer's view that associates humanity's crisis of meaning with the loss of its ability to connect and relate. As soon as Ellie receives from the alien the same answer to her heart's deeper yearning, *Contact* closes the earth-heaven circle and establishes its message.

²⁰Stone 2016, 4.

²¹Chiang 2016, 30-31.

²²Chiang 2016, 33, 34.

²³Chiang 2016, 35.

²⁴Chiang 2016, 33.

²⁵Camus 2005, 4.

²⁶Camus 2005, 58.

²⁷Camus 2005, 56.

²⁸Nagel 1971, 725.

²⁹Sagan 1997, 357.

³⁰Sagan 1997, 358, 360.

³¹Sagan 1997, 372.

³²Fleming and Brown 2018, 343.

³³The book's title significantly indicates that the aliens' language is the cosmos' and so, in this context, the extraterrestrials are the universe that finally speaks

³⁴Chiang 2016, 39.

³⁵Fleming and Brown 2018, 359.

³⁶Fleming and Brown 2018, 345.

³⁷As the film comes to a close, a brief scene reveals that some evidence of the objectivity of Ellie's journey does exist, though it is concealed by government officials. This, however, does not change Ellie's test of faith, since she herself remains oblivious of the evidence

³⁸Camus 2005, 4-5

³⁹Sagan 1997, 143.

⁴⁰Krämer 2013.

⁴¹Camus 2005, 117

⁴²For Camus, the answer – that such a condition would only aggravate absurdity – is quite clear: When he relates to Oedipus, he writes: 'From the moment he knows, his tragedy begins' (Camus 2005, 118)

⁴³Camus 2005, 55, 58

⁴⁴Camus 2005, 56

⁴⁵Fleming and Brown 2018, 361.

⁴⁶Camus 2013, 247-248.

⁴⁷Sanders 2009, 1.

⁴⁸Litch 2010, 4.

⁴⁹Sanders 2009, 1.

⁵⁰Mulhall 2008, 3-10.

⁵¹Golomb 2005, 120.

⁵²Camus 2005, 26

⁵³Foley 2008, 7.

⁵⁴Camus 2005, 4.

⁵⁵Fleming and Brown 2018, 360.

⁵⁶Camus 2005, 12, 13

⁵⁷Camus 2005, 49, 50

⁵⁸Camus 2005, 27

⁵⁹Isaacson 2008, 387.

REFERENCES

- Bowker, Matthew Hamilton. 2008. "Albert Camus and The Political Philosophy of the Absurd." Ph.D. diss.
- Camus, Albert. 2005. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Translated by Justin O'Brien. London: Penguin Books.
- . 2013. *The Rebel*. Translated by Anthony Bower. London: Penguin Classics.
- Carruthers, Anne. 2018. "Temporality, Reproduction and the Not-Yet in Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*." *Film-Philosophy* 22 (3): 321–339.
- Chiang, Ted. 2016. *Stories of Your Life and Others*. Vintage.
- Ebert, Roger. 1997, jul. *Contact*. www.RogerEbert.com.
- Fleming, David H, and William Brown. 2018. "Through a (First) Contact Lens Darkly: *Arrival*, Unreal Time and Chthulucinema." *Film-Philosophy* 22 (3): 340–363.
- Foley, John. 2008. *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt*. New York: Routledge.
- Golomb, Jacob. 2005. *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus*. New York: Routledge.
- Isaacson, Walter. 2008. *Einstein, His Life and Universe*. London: Pocket Books.
- Krämer, Peter. 2013. "'Want to take a ride?': reflections on the blockbuster experience in *Contact* (1997)." In *Movie Blockbusters*, 140–152. Routledge.
- Litch, Mary M. 2010. *Philosophy Through Films*. New York: Routledge.
- Mulhall, Stephen. 2008. *On Film*. New York: Routledge.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1971. "The absurd." *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (20): 716–727.
- . 1986. *The View From Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Richard, David Evan. 2018. "Film Phenomenology and the "Eloquent Gestures" of Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival*." *Cinephile* 12 (1): 41–47.
- Sagan, Carl. 1997. *Contact*. New York: Pocket books.
- Sanders, Steven M. 2009. *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Stone, Bryan. 2016. "Religious Faith and Science in *Contact*." *Journal of Religion & Film* 2 (2): 6.
- Svetkey, Benjamin. 1997. "Making Contact: The Story behind the controversial space odyssey." *Entertainment Weekly*, July, vol. 18.